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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 002619

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/SYRIA: BOT'S ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: POLCOUNS ANDREW J. SCHOFER FOR REASONS 1.4(B/D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Dutch Foreign Minister Bot used his December 12 visit to Damascus to press for quick resolution of a controversial child custody case as well as to discuss broader regional issues, including Iraq, Lebanon, and Israeli-Palestinian relations. Bot's Syrian interlocutors, including President Assad, reportedly argued that Europe was a more "natural ally" for Syria than Iran, and pressed for greater political and economic engagement. A Dutch MFA official accompanying Bot was impressed with Assad's "vision" and claimed the Syrians have no interest in fomenting unrest in the region, as such unrest could ultimately undermine Assad's regime as well. She acknowledged, however, that actions speak louder than words, and said the Dutch will continue to press the Syrians to act more constructively. The Syrians told Bot they "welcomed" the Baker-Hamilton report's call for greater dialogue between Syria and the U.S., but placed more hope in the near term in using Europe as an intermediary. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) During his one-day visit to Damascus on December 12, Dutch Foreign Minister Bot met separately with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu'allam, and Vice President/Former Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara'a. On December 13, Henriette van Lynden, Director of the Dutch MFA's Department of Middle East and North African Affairs, briefed Ambassador Arnall and visiting Congressman Hoekstra on the results of the visit.

CHILD CUSTODY CASE TOPS AGENDA

13. (C) According to van Lynden, who accompanied Bot to Damascus, the most pressing issue on the Foreign Minister's agenda was to bring about a quick resolution to an outstanding child custody case which has become a major political issue in the Netherlands. (The two children of a Dutch mother and a dual national father have been residing in the Dutch Embassy in Damascus for several months after fleeing their father, who faces kidnapping charges in the Netherlands for taking them to Syria in violation of a Dutch custody judgment.) Bot made clear to his Syrian interlocutors -- including President Assad -- that the current situation is unacceptable, and must be resolved before there can be any progress in Dutch-Syrian relations. Van Lynden said Assad was sympathetic to Bot's appeal and promised to use his influence to resolve the case satisfactorily "before the end of the year."

14. (C) Bot also used the opportunity to engage with the Syrians on Iraq, Lebanon, and the Israel-Palestinian dispute. According to van Lynden, Bot has a history of engaging constructively with his Syrian counterparts and had consulted with Israeli FM Livni before deciding on the visit; Van Lynden placed Bot's visit within the context of other trips to Syria by European political figures, including German FM Steinmeier.

15. (C) Van Lynden described Bot's Syrian interlocutors as keenly interested in deepening engagement with Europe and seriously disturbed by the chaotic situations in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. Asked by Congressman Hoekstra what evidence the Syrians presented to bolster the latter claim, van Lynden acknowledged that "concrete examples" were hard to cite. She argued, however, that it was not in Syria's interest as a secular, multi-ethnic state to foment religious and ethnic divisions in the region, as similar divisions could be exploited to undermine Assad's regime. Bot's Syrian interlocutors, she added, had used this argument, among others, to explain why they believed Europe, rather than Iran, was a more "natural ally" for Syria over the long-term.

"IT'S NOT OUR FAULT!"

16. (C) Pressed on why Syrian actions did not appear consistent with their professed good intentions, van Lynden repeated several Syrian arguments; e.g., they accepted money from Iran "because they had no alternatives;" they supported

THE HAGUE 00002619 002 OF 002

anti-Sinoria movements in Lebanon because "the U.S. was supporting an anti-Syrian regime there;" they would not close the border with Iraq because "they lacked the equipment and capability." On each of these points, however, van Lynden stressed that the Dutch would continue to push the Syrians to back up their words with real actions. She noted that the Syrians continued to blame others -- especially the U.S. and Israel, but also Palestinian leader Abbas, whom they characterized as "too weak" to control Hamas -- for problems they helped create.

17. (C) Van Lynden, who served in Beirut in the 1980's, noted that Syria clearly has not developed as much economically as many of its neighbors over the last few decades. For that reason, Bot's Syrian interlocutors expressed strong interest in boosting economic ties with Europe -- which would also allow them to put more distance between Damascus and Tehran. Bot reportedly reminded the Syrians that the EU's Association Agreement with Syria -- which has been initialed but not submitted for ratification -- could not move forward without clear progress on the Syrian side on Human Rights and other areas. Van Lynden suggested that the association agreement nevertheless remained an important source of potential leverage. While the Syrians welcomed the Baker-Hamilton report's recommendation of increased U.S. engagement with Syria and Iran, she added, in the short term they clearly put more hope in the possibility of strengthening ties with Europe, and of using European contacts as a bridge to the U.S.

A MAN WITH A VISION

18. (C) According to van Lynden, Syrian President Assad as "very much his father's son," but opined that, unlike his father, he "also appears to have a positive vision for the future." Hoekstra observed that many people had made the same analysis when Assad first took power in 2000, but he had so far failed to deliver. Van Lynden took the point, but reiterated that, in the Dutch/European view, engaging with

Assad critically stood a better chance of shaping a positive future for Syria and the region than seeking to isolate him.

BLAKEMAN